Ann. Natal Mus. Vol. 29(2) Pages 417–432 Pietermaritzburg October, 1988

Patterns and perceptions of stone-built settlements from the Thukela Valley Late Iron Age

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ABSTRACT

Recent work on Late Iron Age stone-built settlements in the interior grasslands of Natal is examined. Recently excavated sites largely confirm previous findings on this type of settlement and suggest that even total excavation is unlikely to give us much more information. Previously unknown rock engravings of the settlements, however, give new insight into the way in which the Iron Age inhabitants perceived the settlement pattern.

INTRODUCTION

In many grassland areas of South Africa Iron Age communities of the past 600 years used stone, to a greater or lesser extent, as a building material. This has left us with a far richer archaeological record of their settlements than is to be found in savanna areas where Iron Age construction remained based on timber.

Our initial research on the Natal interior sites took the form of an aerial survey in which the distribution of stone structures was established and the variation in settlement pattern was noted. The Mgoduyanuka site near Bergville was selected for ground survey and excavation because it contained examples across the range of settlement patterns as well as a large midden—a rare feature of these sites (Maggs 1982). The evidence provided a picture of a mixed farming economy with livestock and grain cultivation, including maize, dated around the 17th–18th centuries. The community was divided into family homesteads of the same order of size as those of the historic Nguni-speaking peoples, with whom the settlements could be linked on the basis of oral tradition. The basic homestead layout was that of a central livestock pen surrounded by huts and other features. In some cases several of these were linked in a row to produce a larger order of settlement.

Our next research step was to map and examine the surface features of a large sample of homesteads, in the same area to find out more about the layout of the individual homestead, their location in relation to one another and how they were situated in relation to topographical features (Maggs *et al* 1986). Some of the points to emerge were that the homestead orientation, as defined by the cattle-pen entrance, is according to the direction of the slope not the cardinal direction and that homesteads were built on moderate slopes in situations avoiding the most elevated or low-lying parts of the landscape. Almost all building took place on or very close to dolerite outcrops which provided the favoured building material. Homesteads were on average no more than 50 m from their nearest neighbour and they tended to occur in clusters. This probably reflects the agnatic clustering noted by anthropologists among contemporary rural settlements of Nguni-speaking peoples.

We felt that considerably larger samples would have to be surveyed in order to achieve further clarification on large scale aspects of patterning such as clustering and ecology. Furthermore, at the level of the individual homestead, clarification had not been reached on certain details of layout despite the approximately 250 units included in the sample. This is because in no single case did it seem likely that we had been able to recover the complete pattern of huts and other structures around the central cattle-pen. Preservation played a part in this, for example paved hut floors were often visible but it is evident that not all huts had paved floors—those with earth floors were not visible except in one case where fire had baked the floor hard (Maggs *et al* 1986: 458). The proximity of one homestead to another made it difficult to draw a dividing line, while in many cases there were confusing remnants from earlier structures. Some of the numerous piles of stone were almost certainly the result of clearing the ground for tilling after the abandonment of the homestead (Hall & Maggs 1979). A further issue revolved around the extent of excavation since the initial work involved the excavation of particular features only, and the larger survey did not include excavation at all. At the level of the individual homestead, we therefore felt that more extensive excavation might contribute to further understanding of the pattern.

The current paper is based on two excavations, one designed to develop a homestead as a site museum (Spioenkop) and the other a rescue project (Strydpoort). During the latter we located rock engravings depicting homesteads—an additional and previously unknown source of information on the topic.

THE SPIOENKOP SITE MUSEUM

In association with Gilbert Torlage, historian for the Natal Parks Board, we selected a Late Iron Age settlement to be partly restored as a site museum within the Spioenkop Dam Nature Reserve (Fig. 1). The homestead has two adjacent livestock pens on the same contour and in similar states of preservation (indicating that they were contemporary) (Fig. 2). It is thus an example of a unit with multiple central enclosures—a characteristic quite commonly found within this settlement pattern. There are also a number of peripheral stone features including paved floors, small stone piles and large lower grindstones.

Hill-wash, postdating the construction of the settlement, has exposed several features below the stock-pens and may indeed have covered features above them, as there is a slight natural terrace here extending to the entrances of the pens themselves where some 40 cm of soil has accumulated since construction. During fieldwork we examined only those features that were already partly exposed. The plan (Fig. 2) confirms that both huts and smaller stone features were often built immediately below the stock-pens but the pattern is incomplete as there would have been many more peripheral features. We therefore surveyed the homestead immediately downslope which was probably part of the same cluster, the centres of the two units being 80 m apart.

This second unit has been subjected to rather more hill-wash, being on a slightly steeper slope, and there did not appear to be any areas of deposition as

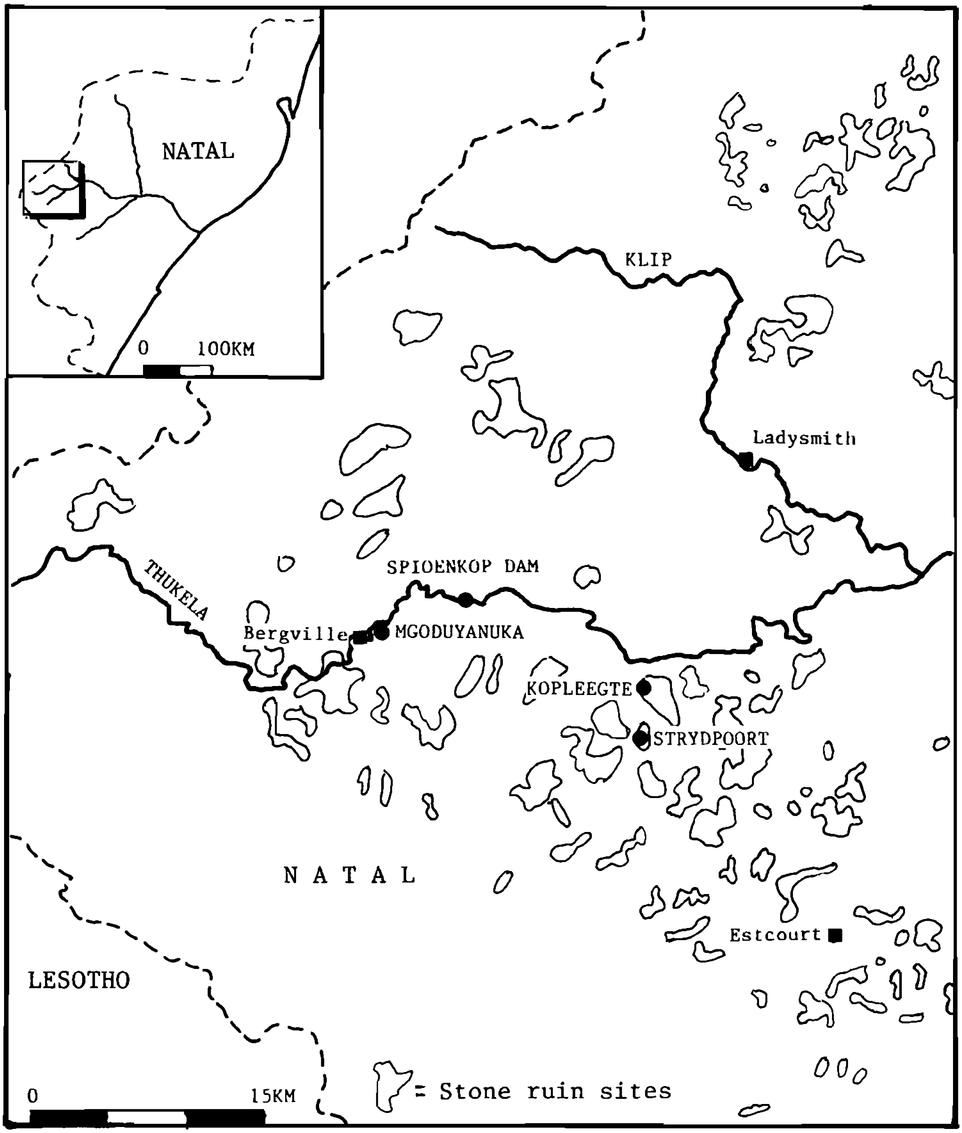

Fig. 1. Distribution of stone and earthwork settlements of the Late Iron Age including those mentioned in the text.

found on the first unit. It therefore seems likely that all or almost all of the surviving stone features are visible on the surface today and that little or nothing would be gained from excavation. The pattern is clearly more complete here, with a series of 22 features completely encircling the central livestock pen (Fig. 3). This plan deserves closer attention for it may approach the best we are likely to get from this type of settlement. Although close, it is effectively separated from the neighbouring unit by an outcropping strata of rock. Furthermore there is no evidence of earlier building on the site, we can, therefore, be fairly sure that all the structures relate to the period during and immediately following the occupation.

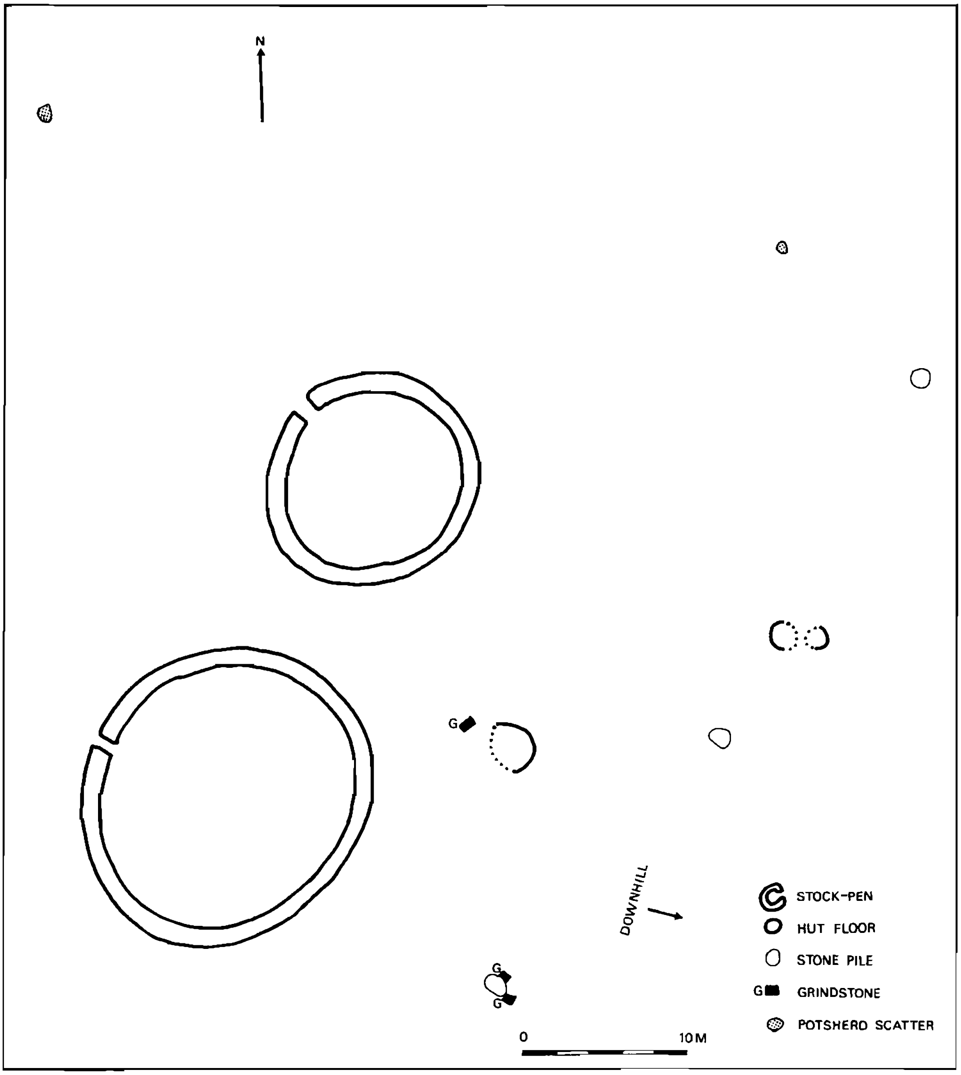

Fig. 2. Plan of Unit 1, Spioenkop Dam Nature Reserve.

Several paved floors 2–3 m in diameter can, with confidence, be interpreted as hut floors (Fig. 3). Three of them form a group at the top end of the homestead with one at the side and another towards the bottom. This is unlikely to reflect the full complement of huts, which leaves us with several alternative interpretations: some of the large stone 'piles' or 'scatters' could have been paved hut floors but are no longer recognisable as such, some paved floors may have totally disintegrated with sheet erosion or some huts may not have had paved floors and are therefore invisible today. Interpretation becomes even more problematic when we look at the other stone features. Local ethnographic analogies indicate that small

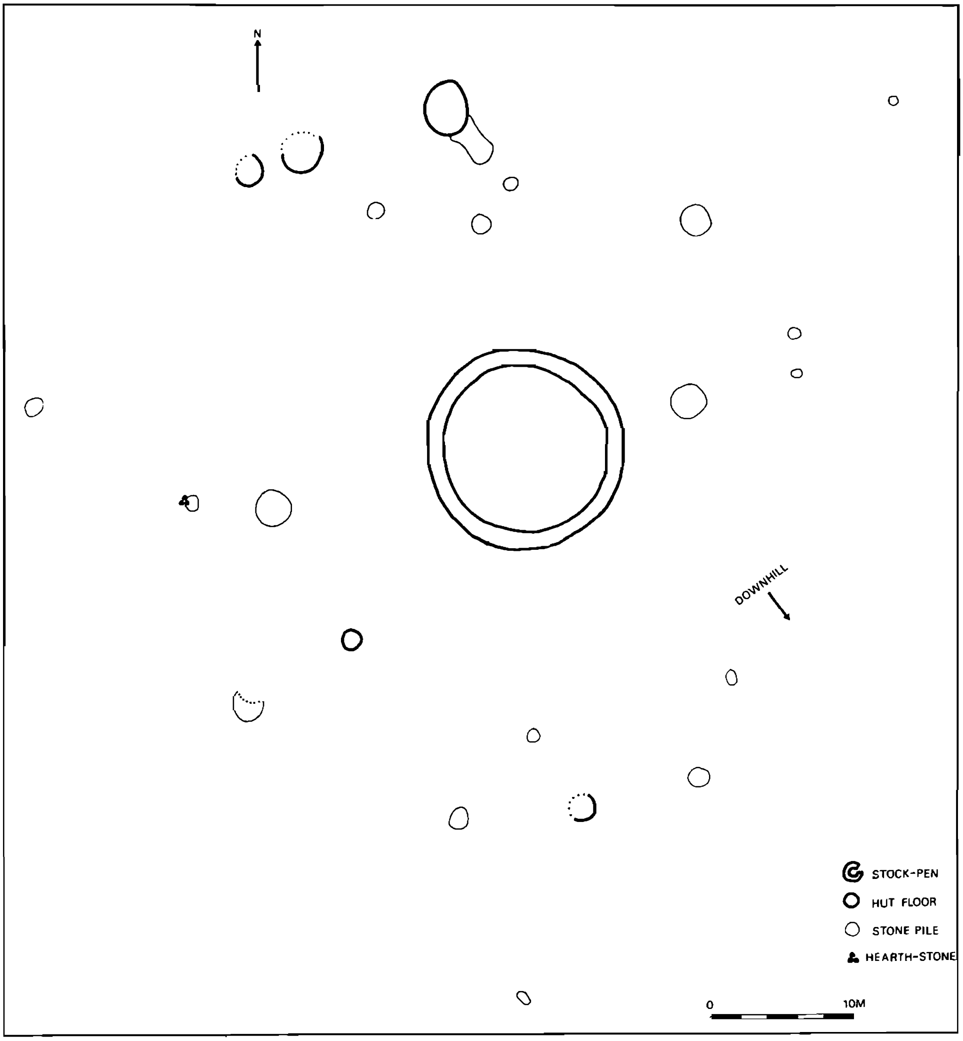

Fig. 3. Plan of Unit 2, Spioenkop Dam Nature Reserve.

piles of stone were built as supports for *izilulu* (grain baskets) or piles of dried dung fuel, to mark graves and to clear land for hoe cultivation (Maggs *et al* 1986). We are unable to assign particular stone piles to any particular one of these functions. Furthermore we are often unable to discount the possibility that some larger 'piles' or 'scatters' are not badly disturbed paved floors. Indeed one small 'pile' on the west side of the homestead included a stone showing the characteristic shape and heat-spalling of a hearth stone, which suggests that this 'pile' may have been a hut. There is the suggestion of a pattern where the inner circle of features are mainly 'piles' while the outer circle includes most of the paved floor, but the evidence is not good enough, nor is the arrangement of features sufficiently regular, to allow us to accept this as a valid pattern.

RESCUE EXCAVATION AT STRYDPOORT

The incomplete homestead patterns that we had recovered from surface surveys and partial excavation pointed to the need for total excavation. An opportunity to do this arose out of the construction of National Road 3 during 1987. Mr M. Gardiner, of de Leeuw & Cather, the resident engineer for the Frere to Thukela River contract, drew our attention to an Iron Age settlement that was to be destroyed in quarrying operations for road material. A portion of this settlement included a row of three livestock pens with peripheral features which seemed to be sufficiently far from neighbours and earlier phases of building to avoid contamination of the settlement pattern. With cooperation from the Department of Transport, Division National Roads, and the contractors (Stock & Stocks) and help from G. Whitelaw and M. Moon we were able to survey and excavate the whole site.

The Strydpoort settlement is on a relatively flat hilltop with no signs of sheetwash as noted at Spioenkop. The soil, derived from weathered dolerite, is relatively fertile and supports a dense grass cover. Before work started the grass cover was burnt and a complete surface survey done of all visible features. With the use of a road grader we then removed the top few centimetres of soil together with the grass tussocks and did a further survey of all visible archaeological features. A third survey was done after the second scrape which took the excavation down to about 10–15 cm. This, however, left windrows between each alternate graded row and therefore did not uncover the whole site to this depth.

The surface survey recorded 68 stone features including hut floors, groups of 'hearth stones' possibly marking unpaved hut floors, a lower grindstone and assorted 'piles' of stone, in addition to the four livestock pens (Fig. 4). The first scrape revealed only seven new stone features one of which was a fragment of the base of a wall suggesting that there had been an earlier phase of building on the site. The second scrape produced no new stone features, which indicated that further excavation was unlikely to add to our knowledge of the built settlement pattern.

The final plan (Fig. 4) reveals a considerable number of stone features around each of the stock-pens. But once again there is no very clear pattern, nor does it seem probable that all of the original structures have been revealed. For example the two areas where rock outcrops on the surface leave large blank spaces around the perimeter of two of the units. Hut floors occur roughly around and in two cases between the stock-pens, but even if we assumed that the features with 'hearthstones' were also huts, there are not enough to form fairly continuous rings around the stock-pens, as we might expect. The variety of size and form of the stone 'piles' again suggests that they served a variety of functions—they do not seem to bear any regular relationship to the 'hut' features. Ethnography would suggest that the two piles within stock-pens were on top of graves but manual excavation showed that nothing had been buried under them.

The most important result of the mechanical excavation was undoubtedly the information it yielded on the pattern of discard. This type of site very seldom has middens visible on the surface, even scatters of discarded material (mainly broken pottery) are seldom seen. Indeed the surface survey revealed no discard related

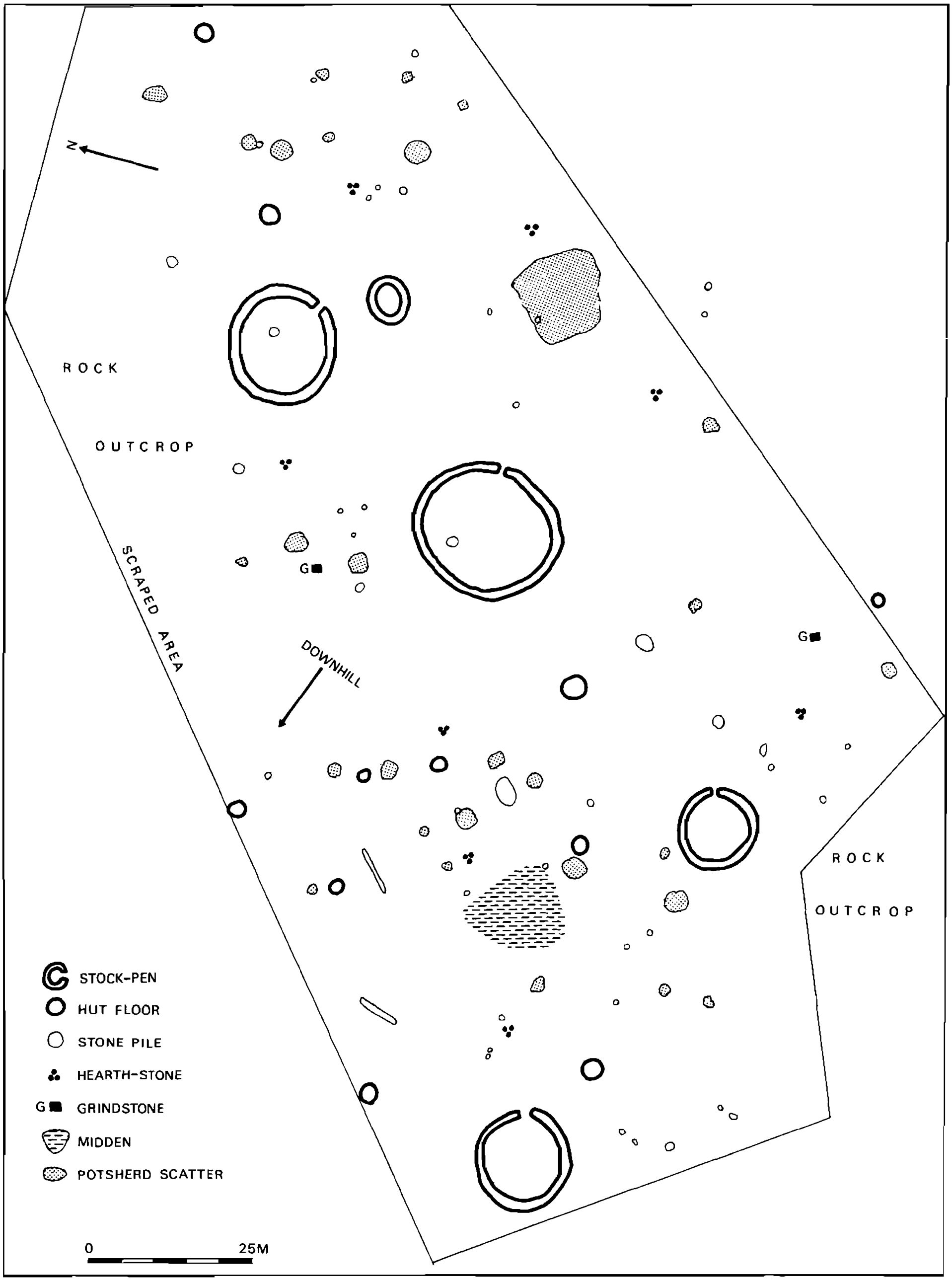

Fig. 4. Plan of excavated settlement at Strydpoort.

features, but the first scrape produced 29 patches of sherds as well as a 'midden' feature including sherds, bone and some burnt fragments. The second scrape produced a further 13 sherd scatters, the only new features at this depth. For the purpose of this discussion these features are all considered to reflect discard, however some of the sherd scatters may indeed be related to areas where ceramics were used or stored.

The pattern of discard on these sites is of interest both in relation to other types of Late Iron Age sites and to that determined by ethnoarchaeological research (Oswald & Mack in press). Most Iron Age research has given relatively little attention to the actual pattern of discard, merely choosing rich midden areas to sample for material remains. Such an approach was adopted in the first stage of our research on this settlement type and only in the second phase did we fully appreciate that midden accumulation was not characteristic of the way of life of these communities. This contrasts with for example the broadly contemporary Sotho communities of the Highveld whose settlements today preserve middens that are readily apparent to the fieldworker and are often clear even on air photographs (eg. Maggs 1976).

The ethnoarchaeological research is of value in providing a model of discard in contemporary Zulu homesteads which still retain a concentric settlement pattern (Oswald & Mack in press). This pattern, though differing in details, notably the downhill rather than uphill stock-pen entrance, is broadly similar to the archaeological sites we are examining. In contemporary homesteads there is a fundamental subdivision into ash from hearths (*umlotha*) and general rubbish such as sweepings (*izibi*). Ash is collected daily from the hearths and discarded on the recognised heap normally on one side of the entrance to the home which in this settlement pattern is immediately downhill from the buildings (Oswald & Mack in press). The handling of ash and the ash heap are closely bound up with concepts of kinship, respect and witchcraft (Raum 1973). The rubbish on the other hand is merely thrown into the veld around the edge of the settlement just beyond the limits of the cleared area which is swept clean (Oswald & Mack in press). Raum (1973: 153) states that in 'tidy homesteads each woman has her rubbish heap. They serve as boundary markers when the kraal is abandoned and the old site is divided up for gardens'. However the recent ethnoarchaeological research did not find this to be the case, merely a radial pattern outwards from the boundary of the homestead which leads to the dispersal rather than concentration of rubbish.

Applying this pattern to the archaeological sites we should expect to find a relatively pure and rather small ash heap near the entrance and a wide radial scatter of other discarded material around the periphery of the built-up area. In practice we certainly found a dispersed pattern which could perhaps reflect such radial discard but this is not clear. The pottery scatters were not at all rich, many of those on the plan (Fig. 4), consisting of no more that three sherds. But their positions are not always clearly peripheral, some are perhaps linked to individual hut floors. While the largest pottery scatter is uphill of two livestock entrances the only feature that might be called a midden, because it contained some bone and burnt flecks as well as pottery, is roughly midway between three stock-pens and therefore perhaps a communal dump, close to several huts. Nothing remotely like an ash heap was found but perhaps this is a factor of preservation. We can merely say that discard was irregularly dispersed towards the periphery of the homesteads.

THE ROCK ENGRAVINGS

The results of the excavations described above suggest that this approach to a more detailed understanding of the settlement pattern would be a long and expensive one with no guarantee of significant advance. However, a new source of evidence became available for, while working in the Strydpoort area, we found a number of patterns engraved on outcrops overlooking the stone ruins. As shown below, the engravings include the features characteristic of this type of settlement pattern.

This is the first time that engraved representations of Iron Age settlement patterns have been reported in close association with stone-built sites in Natal. Examples are known from the Transvaal and northern Cape Province while engravings of homesteads have been found in lower lying areas of Natal (Malan 1955 1957). In several of the published examples the engravings represent the generalised settlement pattern quite clearly, although they may not accurately

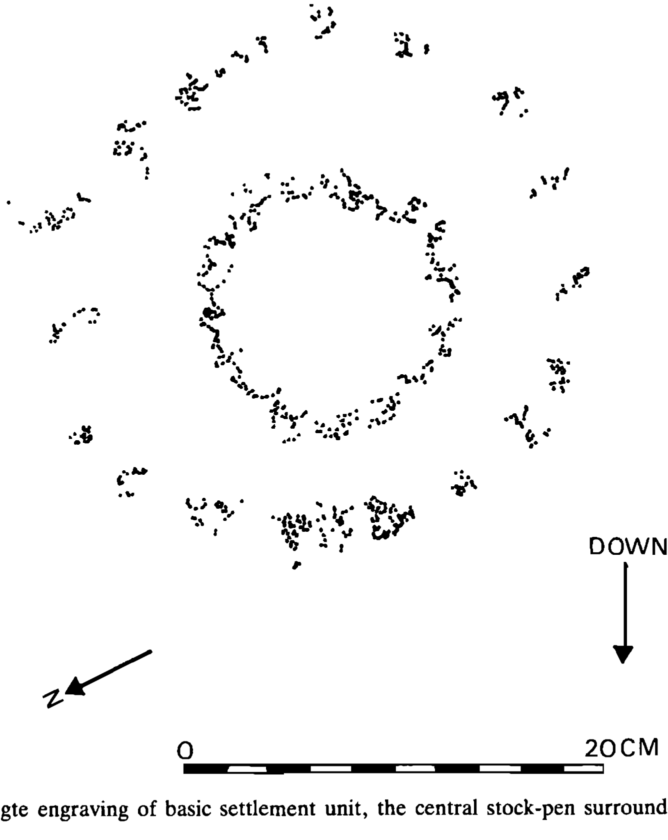

Fig. 5. Kopleegte engraving of basic settlement unit, the central stock-pen surrounded by a ring of huts.

reflect individual homesteads or settlements. The Thukela engravings certainly reflect enough of the settlement pattern, as we know it, to be an important source for the present discussion.

We already know of five engraved sites, but the most informative examples come from one site, on the farm Kopleegte which was brought to our attention by M. Richmond, Assistant Resident Engineer on the N3 construction site.

Most of the engravings are merely simple circles, but a striking feature is that quite a number of them have an opening on that portion of their perimeter that is uphill according to the slope of the rock face. This clearly reflects the importance attached to stock-pens opening uphill within these communities.

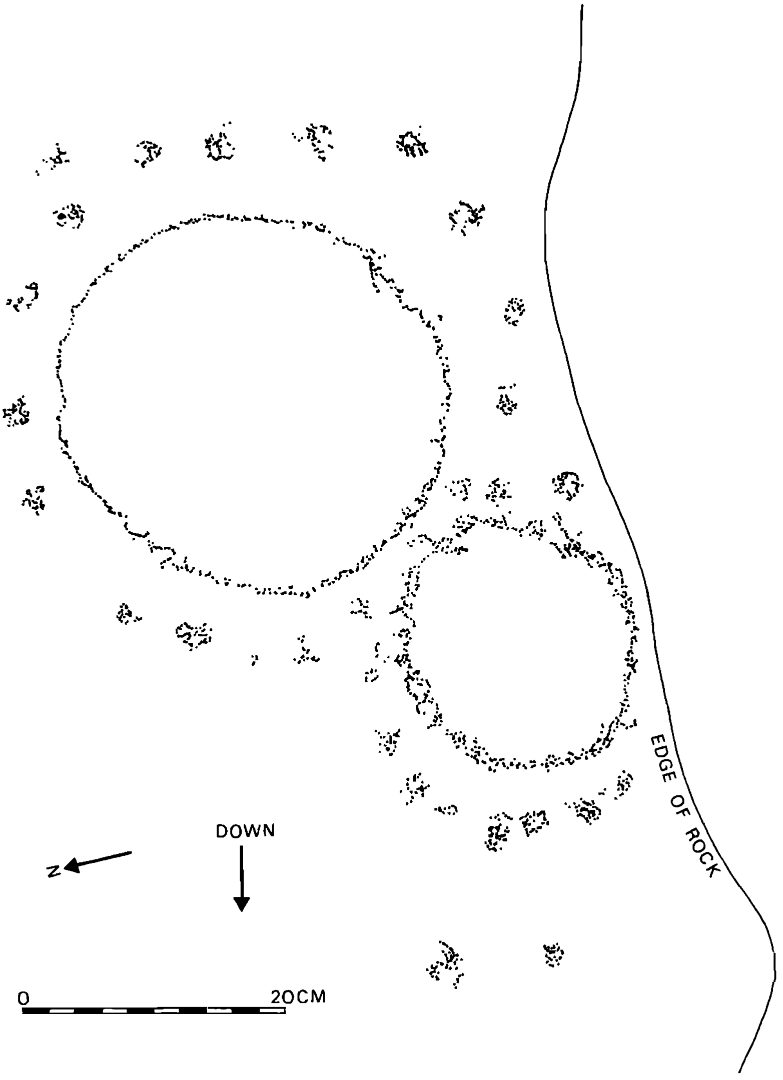

Fig. 6. Kopleegte engraving of double settlement unit, each with its own ring of huts.

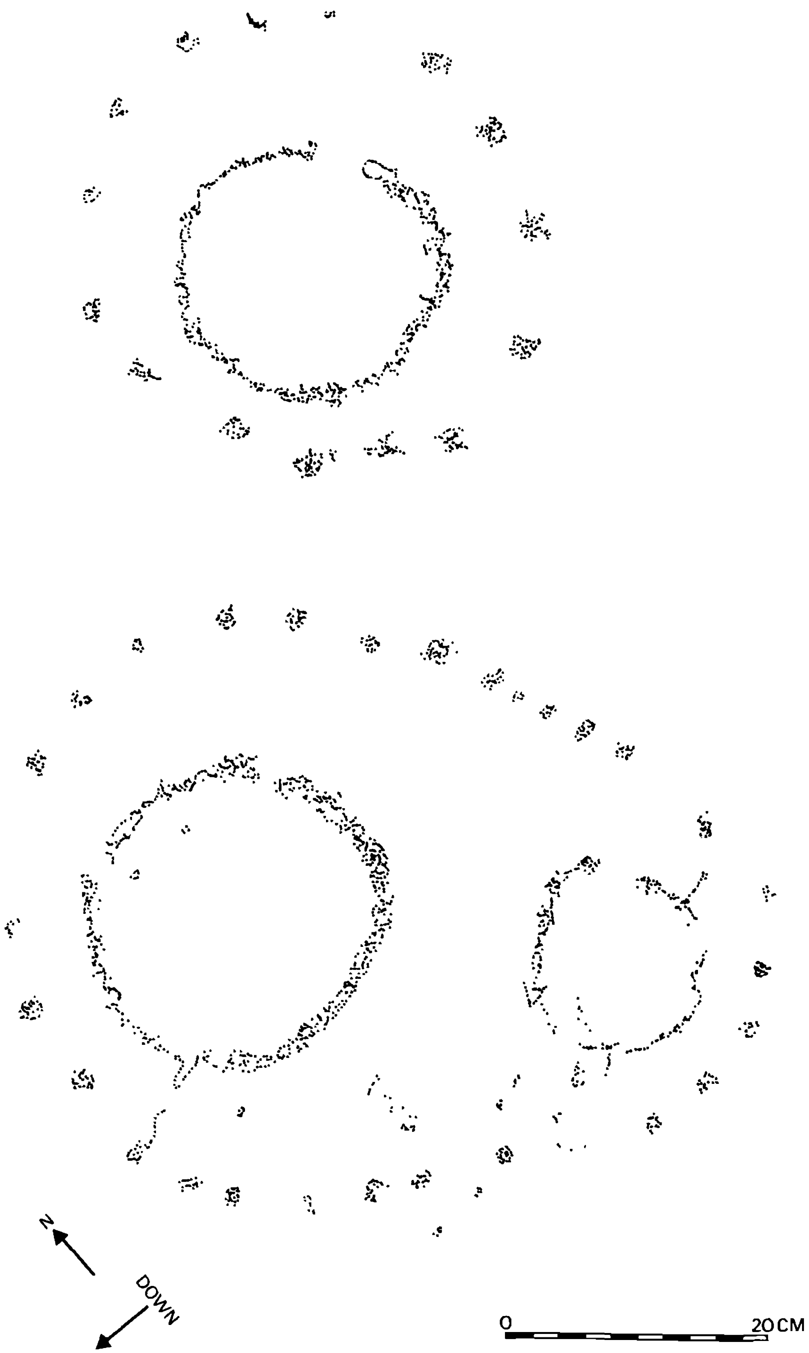

Fig. 7. Kopleegte engraving of two settlement units, one with two stock-pens.

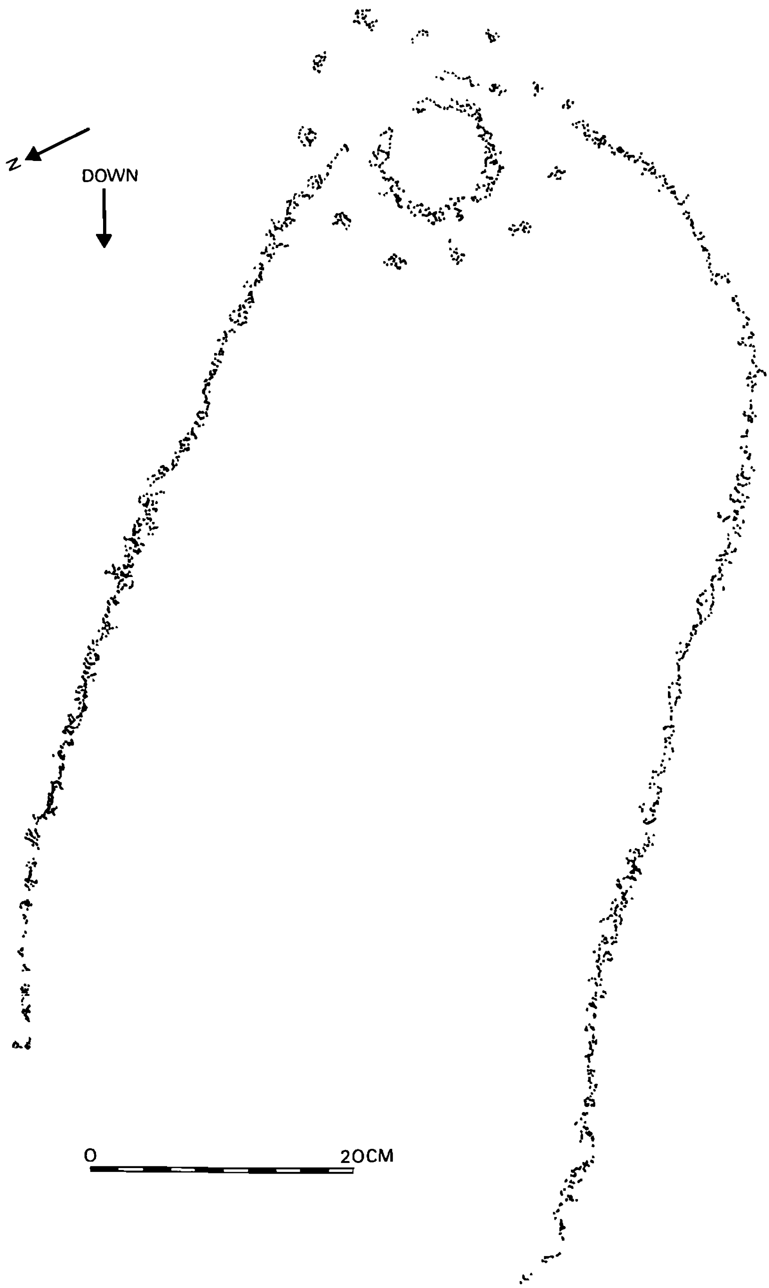

Fig. 8. Kopleegte engraving of settlement unit with two paths leading from the uphill stock-pen entrance.

A fairly common additional feature is a number of pecked dots arranged in a neat ring, spaced equidistantly from the central circle (Fig. 5). As we have seen, the archaeological sites seldom show such a neat arrangement of smaller structures but nevertheless it is virtually certain that these dots portray huts. Assuming this to be the case it becomes apparent that the pattern as perceived by the builders/engravers was that the huts should form a neat concentric ring. In that case either the archaeological sites seldom preserve this pattern (there are a few cases where it is present eg. Maggs 1982, Fig. 12), or alternatively the perceived pattern was a simplification of the reality.

Also reflected in the engravings is the pattern of placing two or more stock-pens in a row along the contour, as we have seen at the Spioenkop and Strydpoort sites. There is evidently some variation here in the placing of huts, both on the ground and in the engravings. Fig. 6 shows huts between the two stock-pens as we saw at Strydpoort, while in Fig. 7 the two closest pens have a neat ellipse of huts enclosing both of them, a pattern recorded previously at Mgoduyanuka (Maggs 1982). Fig. 7 could almost be a plan of the Spioenkop settlement (Figs 2 & 3) but for the direction of slope.

A few engravings show an additional feature—long lines starting at the stock-pens—which evidently depict paths. The simpliest of these shows two paths starting at the uphill entrance to the stock-pen and curving round to run directly down

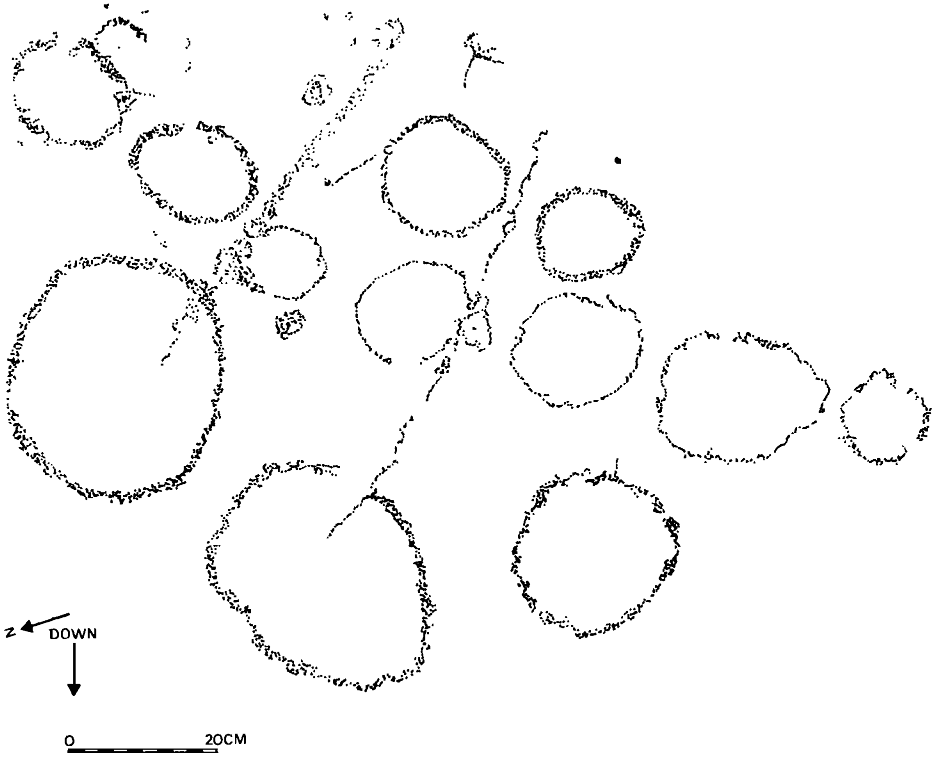

Fig. 9. Kopleegte engraving of rows of stock-pens arranged along the contour, two have uphill entrances and paths.

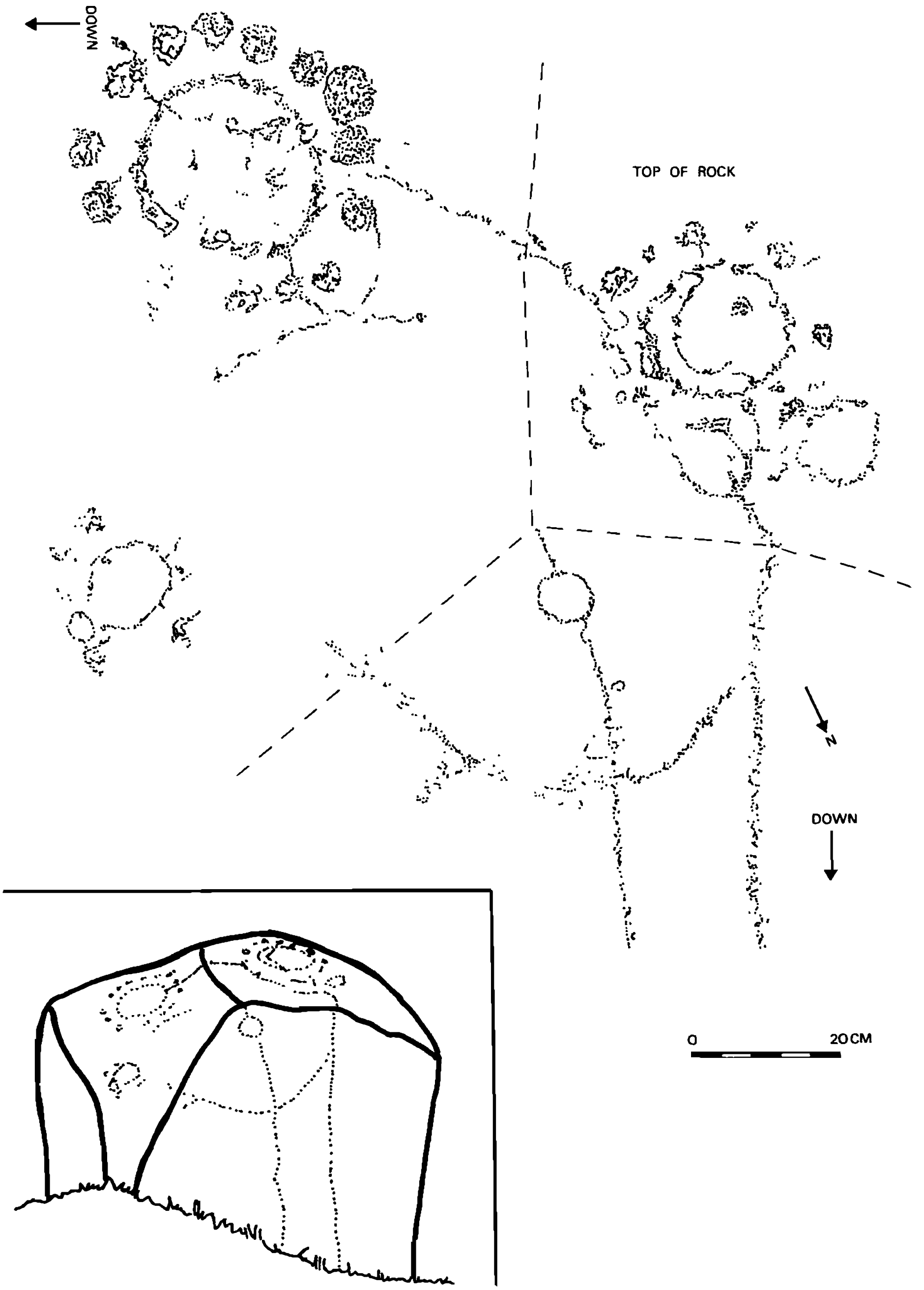

Fig. 10. Kopleegte engraving of settlement units linked by paths. Insert (bottom left) illustrates relationship between engravings and configuration of rock.

the rock towards the ground (Fig. 8), perhaps cattle tracks leading down to the nearest stream. A more complex engraving has three rows of circular pens running across the slope of the rock face, some of the pens showing uphill entrances. From the two lowest pens paths emerge running uphill between the other pens (Fig. 9). Finally, the most complex example is rather like a three dimensional topographical map which loses something when flattened out in reproduction and therefore we have included a sketch to show how the engravings fit on the various planes of the rock surface (Fig 10). Two large homesteads with rings of huts occupy the upper (perhaps prestigious) part of the complex. They are linked by a path while two other paths run down the north face of the rock, each from a homestead or pen, again suggestive of cattle tracks down to the nearest stream. A linking path swings left across the north face towards a smaller, crudely pecked homestead. A number of social features may be reflected here such as status, importance of cattle and perhaps even a cluster of homesteads linked by kinship.

CONCLUSIONS

The general pattern of this kind of settlement is now fairly well known and this paper supports earlier conclusions, for example the strict requirement that stockpen entrances should face uphill, that huts and other smaller structures form a loose ring around the central pen and that there is no surrounding outer wall or fence of any sort. The communities' perception of the pattern, as demonstrated in the engravings, shows a neat, evenly spaced ring of huts. The actual sites examined here, however, do not suggest anything like such a neat positioning of the smaller structures, although a few such cases have been noted in the earlier studies. This question is further complicated by the post-abandonment taphonomy of the sites, notably cultivation of the site perhaps accompanied by piling up of stones into mounds to provide clear patches for hoe agriculture. Many of the recorded stone piles may reflect this process.

In view of previous work together with the site surveys presented here it appears that even with total excavation, using mechanical equipment, we may learn little more about these settlements at the level of the individual homestead than we already know. Manual excavation of such large areas would be slow and expensive, while even here there is no guarantee of significantly more information emerging. Perhaps the most promising available source is therefore the rock engravings, even if they may represent idealised rather than precise plans—a point that is no more than a possibility on current evidence. Since during the current project we examined only a few potential sites close to the new N3 motorway and yet found five with engravings, there is clearly potential for future work in this direction.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Gilbert Torlage, Martin Gardiner, Mike Richmond, Mike Moon, Gavin Whitelaw and members of the Natal Branch of the South African Archaeological Society for assistance in the field; Natal Parks Board for accommodation at Spioenkop; National Transport Commission for funding the work at Strydpoort and Kopleegte and Charles Maggs and Val Ward for illustrations.

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Date received: 27 August 1987.